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C O N F I D E N T I A L ISTANBUL 001647

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: POSSIBLE EDUCATION MINISTRY MOVEMENT ON HALKI?

REF: ISTANBUL 1347

Classified By: A/CG Stuart Smith for reason 1.4 (d).

11. (SBU) Summary: Recent encouraging comments by Turkish government officials about prospects for re-opening Halki Theological Seminary have sparked extensive press interest. Education Minister Huseyin Celik, in a recent meeting with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, said that re-opening Halki (possibly as a theological technical school) is long overdue and would be good for the development of Turkish democracy. The Greek Orthodox Community, while optimistic, is not holding its breath. End Summary.

12. (SBU) On October 30, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew met with National Education Minister Huseyin Celik to discuss the status of the Halki Seminary on Heybeli Island, outside Istanbul. Patriarchate sources were very pleased by Celik's "positive outlook," but said that no concrete steps for the re-opening of Halki (which has been closed since 1971) were taken.

13. (C) According to Metropolitan Meliton of Philadelphia, the idea to re-designate Halki as a part of the Theological Faculty of Istanbul University is now not being seriously considered. Instead, he said, Halki may be re-opened as a private theological "technical school." Questions remain as to whether Halki would be allowed to administer a four-year course of study, or would be limited to only one year. Meliton said the Patriarchate would be willing to discuss this point further.

14. (U) Following the meeting with Bartholomew, Celik made a statement to the press that "the issue of the seminary on Heybeli Island has been on the agenda for 32 years, and doesn't need to be protracted any longer." Further, he said, "having a free education in Christian theology is a necessary part of the democratic structure of the Turkish state." All major press coverage of the meeting was positive.

15. (C) In a separate meeting, Yavuz Onen, Human Rights Foundation President (protect), said that he believes nothing new is happening, and that Celik's press statements were intended as positive human rights publicity for the EU's benefit. Onen has been involved in discussions on the status of Halki for many years.

16. (C) Comment: The Patriarchate hears good things from all AK Party ministers they've met with. While the meetings indicate a more open-minded attitude to the issue in the Erdogan government, to date the government has not followed words with action, and reaction from the Kemalist core has been unremittingly harsh and xenophobic. Moreover, our attempts to find anyone in the Education Ministry in Ankara who is responsible for what Celik said would be a commission to study the way ahead have gone for naught.

17. (C) Additionally, the Patriarchate told us that, in their August meeting, PM Erdogan implied to Bartholomew that, in return for opening Halki, he might expect some quid pro quo from Greece with regard to the treatment of the Turkish minority in Thrace and/or the long-delayed opening of a mosque in Athens (a linkage that the Patriarchate rejects). We are continuing to press GoT and AK Party officials for clarification of Celik's statement and the GoT's intent. End comment.

SMITH